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ABSTRACT

This publication is one of a series designed as a companion to the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE)'s fact book, "Policy Indicators for Higher Education: WICHE States." The title article maintains that the growth of distance learning programs has heightened existing concerns about their quality. Institutions can ensure that the programs they deliver at a distance meet high academic standards. States can empower the education consumer by providing information on how to identify quality programming. Higher education governing boards can enforce quality standards in program review and provide institutions with financial incentives for developing quality programming. Accrediting bodies can establish assessment and evaluation standards directed at ensuring quality distance education programming. Finally, regional organizations can facilitate the sharing of quality instructional programming. The publication also contains a table summarizing the "Principles of Good Practice for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs." (DLS)

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WICHE Policy Insights

Quality Assurance in Distance Education

ED 421 992

The growth of distance learning programs has heightened existing concerns about their quality. Institutions can ensure that the programs they deliver at a distance meet high academic standards. States can empower the education consumer by providing information on how to identify quality programming. Higher education governing boards can enforce quality standards in program review and provide institutions with financial incentives for developing quality programming. Accrediting bodies can establish assessment and evaluation standards directed at ensuring quality distance education programming. Finally, regional organizations can facilitate the sharing of quality instructional programming.

April 1996

Background

Diverse forces have combined to drive the growth of technology-based approaches to delivering higher education programs since the mid-1980s. Factors leading to the explosive growth of technology use in higher education have been:

- the need to reach an increasingly diverse student population, including workers, rural residents, and place-bound adults;
- the demands of an increasingly technologically sophisticated society; and
- the financial pressures driving state governments to seek more convenient, cost-effective, and efficient ways to provide postsecondary education access to their citizens.

For years, postsecondary institutions in the West have been national leaders in providing distance learning programs. Because of the western region's geography and demography–large stretches of land with dispersed populations–many WICHE states have developed extensive telecommunications networks. Moreover, at a meeting in December 1995, members of the Western Governors' Association unanimously endorsed the notion of a regional virtual university that would offer courses through technology and award its own credentials.

Until now, however, there has been little to guide the review and quality control of electronically offered programs. Planning and policy development have tended to focus on technology itself or on governance and coordination issues, rather than on crucial questions related to how an institution meets the needs of students in technology-based programs or how institutions ensure an ongoing commitment to excellence for students.

A few groups are leading regional and national efforts to reach a consensus on the elements of quality. Following extensive consultation with university faculties and administrators, the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications prepared the *Principles of Good Practice for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs* (1995) (see Table 1). This statement is now part of the policy discussion in several states and within regional and professional accrediting agencies. A comparable document, the American Council on Education's (ACE) *Guiding Principles for Distance Learning in a Learning Society* is forthcoming.

Policy Options and Status of the States

Although courses and programs have been offered through distance learning technologies for some time, institutions/systems of higher education, state governments, higher education coordinating and governing boards, regional and professional/specialized accrediting agencies, and regional higher education organizations are just beginning to address the issue of quality assurance. Established policies and practices provide helpful lessons to others who are developing appropriate policies.

***Policy Insights** is a new series designed as a companion publication for WICHE's recently published fact book, **Policy Indicators for Higher Education: WICHE Status**. Drawing on the indicators contained in the fact book, **Policy Insights** examines current issues in higher education from the perspective of policymakers at the state level and on the campus. WICHE anticipates producing four issues of **Policy Insights** annually.*

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Higher education institutions and systems can ensure that their courses and programs offer quality learning experiences. As colleges and universities move to make programs available beyond their campuses, they are being influenced both by external and internal forces to rethink the role of technology and to develop policies that address issues such as instructional design, faculty-student interaction, and student support services. A common set of standards, such as those put forward by the Western Cooperative or ACE, will help institutions identify areas that are crucial to policy development and offer basic guidelines for developing quality distance education programming.

State governments can empower the education consumer by providing information on how to identify quality programming. The primary state interest is protecting the education consumer. State governments can do this by requiring educational providers to publicly disclose their accreditation status, providing consumers with criteria for evaluating the quality of a program, and, where possible, acting as an ombudsman when the consumer's trust has been violated.

Traditionally, however, the state role in quality assurance in higher education has been one of regulation and licensing. Almost every state has some type of procedure for review and licensure of out-of-state institutions that seek to offer courses in their state:

- Fourteen of the 15 WICHE states require either registration or licensure of all or most out-of-state programs. In seven of these states (Alaska, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota, Utah, and Wyoming) accredited institutions from out-of-state are exempt from licensure.
- Hawaii is the only state without a registration or licensure requirement for out-of-state postsecondary institutions. Hawaii requires only that non-accredited institutions disclose their accreditation status in all catalogs and promotional materials.
- Reference to electronically delivered programs is included in registration/ licensure policies in six states (California, Colorado, Idaho, Oregon, South Dakota, and Washington).

Stricter licensing requirements usually are among the first options states consider when looking for ways to protect the education consumer. There are several reasons, however, why this may not be the best policy option. First, in the era of global electronic communication, enforcement of licensure requirements is difficult, if not impossible. Since there is no way to predict the location of a student studying over the Internet, it is nearly impossible to stop unscrupulous providers or those with poor quality programs from offering programs. Second, strict state licensing/ registration requirements may dissuade quality institutions from delivering programs through distance technologies. The University of North Dakota, for example, was discouraged by strict state regulations from offering its unique, multi-disciplinary space studies program in Washington. Other reputable, public institutions decided not to offer academic programs through distance technologies in Idaho and California because of strict regulations in those states. Finally, it is unclear whether applying state licensing requirements to programs from providers that do not haye a physical presence in the state can be considered a "restraint of trade" under the Commerce Clause of the U.S. Constitution.

State higher education coordinating and governing boards can incorporate quality standards for distance learning into their program review and funding processes. Reciprocal agreements among states, whereby a receiving state can rely on a home state's review to ensure quality, will become more feasible as more states adopt quality standards. Such agreements would, in turn, benefit program providers by ensuring that they would no longer have to meet the disparate requirements of 50 states' regulations.

- The Oregon State System for Higher Education (OSSHE) includes criteria for evaluating distance learning programs in its current program review process. The OSSHE *Distance Education Policy Framework*, published in 1995, sets out specific criteria for maintaining the "integrity" of programs offered to distant sites.
- The New Mexico Commission on Higher Education is considering tying quality expectations for distance learning to formula funding. The commission has a policy under review that would require institutions receiving

formula funds for extended learning programs to meet the criteria for quality laid out in the Western Cooperative's *Principles of Good Practice*.

- Washington is incorporating the *Principles of Good Practice* into its *Guidelines for Program Planning, Approval, and Review for Four-Year Public Institutions*. Several other states in the WICHE region have endorsed or are considering endorsing the Western Cooperative's *Principles of Good Practice*: Arizona, Colorado, Montana, South Dakota, and Utah.

Accrediting agencies can build strong quality review policies into their guidelines and evaluation criteria. Accreditation is an important benchmark for educational quality. In 12 of the 15 WICHE states accreditation is the principal criterion for granting approval to an out-of-state institution interested in offering an education program within the state. Accreditation also is the standard most frequently used by students and businesses to evaluate the quality of a program of study.

As of March 1995, the boards of three regional accrediting bodies–the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Institutions, the junior college division of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, and the Southern Association of Schools and Colleges–had endorsed the Western Cooperative's *Principles*. All of the regional accrediting agencies are expected to incorporate the *Principles* into their reviews of distance education programs by the end of the year. Moreover, the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business and the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education are formulating guidelines to help their evaluation teams review distance learning programs and student support services.

Regional organizations can facilitate the sharing of quality instructional programming. Through research and information sharing, regional organizations can identify and promote quality education programs; assist states in identifying and eliminating barriers to the sharing of quality education programs; provide consumer information on how to identify quality programs; and help states avoid costly program duplication.

Table 1

Principles of Good Practice for Electronically Offered Academic Degree and Certificate Programs

Curriculum and Instruction

- each program of study results in learning outcomes appropriate to the rigor and breadth of the degree or certificate awarded.
- an electronically offered degree or certificate program is coherent and complete.
- the program provides for either real-time or delayed interaction between faculty and students and among students.
- qualified faculty provide appropriate oversight of the program electronically offered.

Institutional Context and Commitment

- the program is consistent with the institution's role and mission.
- review and approval processes ensure the appropriateness of the technology being used to meet the program's objectives.
- the program provides faculty support services specifically related to teaching via an electronic system.
- the program provides training for faculty who teach via the use of technology.
- the program ensures that appropriate learning resources are available to students.
- the program provides students with clear, complete, and timely information on the curriculum, course and degree requirements, nature of faculty student interaction, assumptions about technological competence and skills, technical equipment requirements, availability of academic support services and financial aid resources, and costs and payment policies.
- enrolled students have reasonable and adequate access to the range of student services appropriate to support their learning.
- accepted students have the background, knowledge, and technical skills needed to undertake the program.
- advertising, recruiting, and admissions materials clearly and accurately represent the program and the services available.
- policies for faculty evaluation include appropriate consideration of teaching and scholarly activities related to electronically offered programs.
- the institution demonstrates a commitment to ongoing support, both financial and technical, and to continuation of the program for a period sufficient to enable students to complete a degree certificate.

Evaluation and Assessment

- the institution evaluates the program's educational effectiveness, including assessments of student learning outcomes, student retention, and student and faculty satisfaction. students have access to such program evaluation data.
- the institution provides for assessment and documentation of student achievement in each course and at completion of the program.

Assumptions

- The electronically offered program is provided by or through an institution that is accredited by a nationally recognized accrediting body.
- The institution's programs holding specialized accreditation meet the same requirements when offered electronically.
- The "institution" may be a traditional higher education institution, a consortium of such institutions, or another type of organization or entity.
- These Principles address programs rather than individual courses.
- It is the institution's responsibility to review educational programs it provides via technology in terms of its own internally applied definitions of these Principles.

Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications, 1995
http://www.wiche.edu/telecom/principles.htm

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- One of the initiatives being pursued by the Southern Regional Education Board's newly formed Educational Technology Cooperative is development of an inventory of existing distance learning programs.

- WICHE's Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications is developing a consumer information brochure for electronic learning. The brochure, which will be distributed through state higher education governing and coordinating boards, will empower students by helping them to ask the right questions of a potential institution.

- The Western Cooperative is working with the Western Governors' Association on its virtual university initiative. One goal of this initiative is to enhance the marketplace for instructional materials. This includes: (1) collecting examples of "best practices" in distance learning and developing prototype technology standards to be used in soliciting instructional materials; (2) developing specifications for providing support services to students studying at a distance; and (3) constructing a virtual catalogue that includes electronically delivered courses and programs which meet standards of good practice in technology-based education.

  A second goal of the virtual university initiative is to shift the focus of quality assessment away from the academic program and toward assessment of the learner. The quality of an academic program will be judged by outcomes (the demonstrated competency of its graduates) rather than resources (faculty credentials, library facilities, etc.). Public disclosure of a program's success at producing competent graduates will help students identify quality programs.

Summary and Conclusion

The growth of distance learning programs over the past decade has heightened existing concerns about how to ensure that higher education programs delivered via telecommunications are of good quality.

- Institutions can ensure that the programs they deliver at a distance are consistent with their institutional mission and meet high academic standards.

- States can empower the education consumer by providing information on how to identify quality programming.

- Higher education governing boards can enforce quality standards in program review and provide institutions financial incentives for the development of quality programming.

- Accrediting bodies can establish rigorous assessment and evaluation standards directed at ensuring quality distance education programming and student support services.

- Regional organizations can facilitate the sharing of quality instructional programming.

Teaching and learning technologies can be a powerful means for meeting the challenges of access, quality, and costs. For the technological revolution in teaching and learning to succeed, however, requires vigilance in ensuring that educational programming made available at a distance meets the high educational standards all students are entitled to expect.

This issue of **Policy Insights** was prepared by Robin Etter Zúñiga, Research Associate, WICHE; and Barbara Krauth, Research Associate, Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications.

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